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ABSTRACT

The research cited in this paper is derived from a 2-year study of a professional development initiative in literacy with faculty members from an elementary school in an economically impoverished urban community. The paper explains that the study observed what a long-term, participatory, and voluntary professional development program constructed around theories of critical literacy looked like in actual practice. The paper's research was largely concerned with examining the evolving knowledge of the teachers as they worked together towards enacting critical approaches to reading, writing, and assessment in their respective classrooms. It states that the primary data reported addresses the negotiation of "place" between the teachers involved in the study and the parents of the children they taught. Contains 15 references. (Author/NKA)

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# "I Don't Live in This Community": Negotiating Critical Literacy in a Professional Development Seminar

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The research cited here is derived from a two year study of a professional development initiative in literacy with faculty members from an elementary school in an economically impoverished, urban community. In this study, I observed what a long-term, participatory, and voluntary professional development program constructed around theories of critical literacy looked like in actual practice. My research was largely concerned with examining the evolving knowledge of the teachers as they worked together towards enacting critical approaches to reading, writing, and assessment in their respective classrooms. The primary data reported on here addresses the negotiation of "place" between the teachers involved in this study and the parents of the children they taught.

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**"I Don't Live in This Community": Negotiating Critical Literacy in a Professional Development Seminar**

> *Yet, if we aspire to a goal of developing a critical citizenry, whose actions are informed by democratic principles of justice that address issues of oppression and discrimination and allow for the creation of multiple spaces where hope is shared, we need a view of literacy that provides a language for naming and transforming the ideological positions and social conditions that obstruct these possibilities.*
>
> --Jeanne Brady

The research cited here is derived from a two year study of a professional development initiative in literacy with faculty members from an elementary school. In this study, I worked with faculty members of an elementary school located outside of a major city in the Northeast and observed what a long-term, participatory, and voluntary professional development program looked like in actual practice. My research was largely concerned with examining the evolving knowledge of the teachers as they worked together in the professional development seminars with holistic and critical approaches to reading, writing, and assessment.

In preliminary interviews with the faculty, I discovered that the teachers had very little confidence in professional development programs for fostering long-term, usable knowledge. They seemed to feel professional development programs came and went rather capriciously and did very little in the way of school reform. In addition to the often capricious nature of professional development the teachers pointed out, I was also concerned about the location of knowledge in traditional professional development programs as a wholly external phenomenon. Thus, I set out to create a program in which teachers' practical knowledge of teaching, learning, and assessment would be utilized while introducing new content information with which to investigate in the seminars. The negotiation of knowledge specifically around issues in children's literacies as it evolved in this professional development program comprised the foundation for this research. Consequently, my intention through this research is to reveal further insights into the concerns voiced by Lieberman and Mclaughlin (1992), Miller (1995), and others about the extent to which such elements as long-term, locally derived commitments to professional development truly impact a school culture. School culture as it is examined in the collection of data included here refers to ways the faculty viewed the intertwinings of their school's culture with the culture of their students. Literacy was negotiated between these views.

Critical Literacy and Teachers' Professional Development

With discussions of more "authentic," performance-based approaches to assessment in our seminars, we often examined the ways the teachers were being assessed and represented by various stakeholders in our long-term, participatory approach to learning (professional development). The effect was one of embedding teachers' stories of their literacy within those of their students'. At times, it became difficult to unravel the selves being constructed in reflective writings and dialogues. The fragmentation of voices between teachers and their students became most problematic, however, when a third voice was introduced, that of the students' parents. These situated literacies of the school and the home often in conflict with one another fought for viability in the teachers' interpretations of the children's experiences.

As a former high school English teacher of an almost exclusively Hispanic student population in Texas, I also found myself confronted with institutional contradictions in definitions of literacy. The struggle for power most often arose in language and words that were privileged. In the English classroom, we read Shakespeare. In the cafeteria, we spoke (or listened to) Spanish. In the faculty lounge, we gossiped and argued in English. Monthly mass occurred in the most inaccessible English of all, that of the doctrine of the Catholic Church. Each setting was like a club with its own set of codes, members, and exclusions. I was often mystified by the fragile, contradictory sense of community that was formed between the white teachers, administrators, students and students' families and the Hispanic teachers, administrators, students and students' families. Particularly as a teacher observing, participating, resisting, and perpetuating pedagogical and social ideologies, I became extremely self-conscious about my constructed identity as well as my relationships with colleagues and students.

During my last year of teaching at this school, like the proverbial flavor of the month professional development that suddenly appears and often melts into insignificance, we had a couple of faculty meetings devoted to linguistic diversity and multiculturalism. Yet, in this tenuous encounter, no one dared to pose the difficult questions of what was critical in all of our literacies—student, parent, administrator, and teacher alike: how any of us could work together with difference, equity, and admiration that would flow into the ways literacy was being sought, understood, and assessed. The two professional development in-services on multiculturalism translated into a fashion show assembly of "costumes" worn around the world. Issues of conflict, community, and the territorial struggle over language that we lived with and whispered about every day were never addressed. The privileging of one language over another in each context of the school festered in a quiet rage of report cards, theology, and graduation parties in Juarez, Mexico. In reflecting on this situation what is most revealing to me is the utter lack of meaningful professional development and the need for critical literacy. Especially within settings of diverse student populations, critical literacy in teachers' professional development becomes vital.

The role of critical literacy in teachers' professional development initiatives is twofold in its implications for pedagogy. On the one hand, there is the need for advocacy for the students and families of the students. While on the other hand, there is the need for teachers to become advocates of themselves, their knowledge and their personal and

professional experiences. Both scenarios are critical to establishing equity in education. Both scenarios see ways to give voice to oppressive encounters and in so doing reformulate the goals of literacy as it is taught and reiterated to students through the ways that schools chose to assess students' literacies and interact with students' families. This most problematic discourse between the child' school and home authority figures all too often becomes a chasm of disbelief, frustration, and blame.

Teachers' beliefs about their students' literacies have a profound impact on the ways students make sense of school and life experiences. As Brady (1994) writes:

> Literacy need to be viewed within an ethical and emancipatory discourse providing a language of hope and transformation that is able to analyze, challenge and transform the ideological referent for understanding how people negotiate and translate their relationship with everyday life. (p. 142)

This understanding of "everyday life" that Brady refers to is often difficult for beleaguered teachers to discover. Yet, as the educators in my study stated, it is also vital for the pedagogical success of students. For the participants in my study, the believed most direct route to better understanding students' literacy practices was through increased contact with the students' families. As the participants stated to me on several instances, they felt the community was diverse in its racial and socio-economic make up. One first grade teacher explained in a journal entry the range of diversity in literacy experiences the students had. She wrote:

> *In my classroom the children are from a variety of backgrounds. The class can be broken into children who are white, Black, and Hispanic. Some children are from middle class backgrounds, while others are from lower class backgrounds. Several children are living in poverty. Within the walls of my own classroom I can see the difference in the amount and kinds of exposure to literacy these children have had. Some children read and write well, while others struggle with letter recognition and express themselves by drawing pictures.*

While the student body was diverse, all of the teachers in my study, and indeed the entire school faculty, were middle class and white. Consequently, much of the dialogue occurring in our seminars was focused on trying to understand and speak for the needs of the students at this school (Alcoff, 1991). In so doing, the teachers also addressed their perceptions of the students' families.

## Two Questions: Insiders, Outsiders, and "Others"

The data reported on here largely began with the following two questions I posed to the participants in my seminars in focus group interviews:

1) Do you life in this community?
2) What are your impressions about the community surrounding/supporting the school; what needs do you perceive to be present in this community?

Although on the surface, these appear to be rather simple questions, they generated a lively discussion and exposed many beliefs and assumptions about the families of the children attending these schools held by the faculty members in my study. Out of the fifteen participants, only four (just under 1/3) physically reside in the school's township. Of these four, two made positive statements about the community and openly identified with the "localness" of the community. Of the remaining two thirds of participants not residing in the township surrounding the school, only one made positive comments about the community as an outsider peering in. These positive comments were a hopeful projection of the future from her memories of the past, a commitment to rejuvenate what she perceived to be a dwindling neighborhood. Primarily she felt positive about enacting changing through a more participatory curriculum and community involvement. This participant stated in a focus group interview in February 1996:

> ***When I first started coming around the area, one of my experiences around here was Christmas and they had this huge Christmas parade. They do it every year. And, they Santa was coming down on the, you know, in the middle of the street. You know it goes over on the radio, and people were literally coming out of their houses with hot chocolate and passing it around. Like the, you know, the houses that are lined up on the streets there, and I thought, God, I want to live here . . . But, it's still going on, so that what I'm saying is all is not lost.***

Previously, this same participant had written positively about parental involvement in a journal entry. In December 1995, she wrote:

> ***People are under the misconception that [this school's] parents are either drug addicts, alcoholics, and simply not even remotely interested in their child's education. Again, people are amazed when I tell them that they are sadly misinformed. Those parents who lack involvement initially, will almost always accept suggestions to help their child. There are also parents whose involvement can be overwhelming (but always accepted!!).***

As the only "outsider" who spoke positively about the community, this teacher was an exception.

With the two participants who positively identified themselves as being "insiders" to the community, one presented a defensive stance while the other one presented more of a "it's not so bad to live here" stance. Both of these teachers were young women who had grown up in this community and had attended this elementary school as children. They had been students of some of their current colleagues. Both of these teachers were actively resistant to the often discriminatory labels ascribed to the families of the community. At one point in a focus group interview with three teachers one of whom was an "outsider" living in a different community and two of whom were "insiders" living in the community, but only one having grown up in the community and still identifying with the community, I asked if they noticed a difference between college educated parents in terms of their participation in their child's education. The discussion that followed revealed many tensions between "insiders", "outsiders", and "others."

*M:* ***So, is there any difference between the parents who are college educated in terms of their participation in their child's education?***

*J:* ***Definitely.***

*D:* ***Oh yea.***

*M:* ***Like night and day would you say?***

*J:* ***Uh huh, they ask questions, they ask—***

*D:* ***They ask <u>different</u> questions.***

*Y:* ***That's not saying, that's not saying that the ones that aren't educated aren't interested because there are so many that are.***

*J:* ***Because there are so many. And they'll ask what do I do? And—***

*Y:* ***And if you go in and out of the teacher's room at different times—J. I'm sure can vouch for this—I get upset a lot because people start to, you know, get down on in general the parents of [this community], my mother's a parent in [this community] and we're doing a pretty good job, you know what I mean kind of thing, and I get offended.***

*J:* ***I don't hear that too much, but I'm only in there with a couple of people.***

*Y:* ***J. and I eat at home.***

*J:* ***I don't eat in there too much.***

*D:* ***There are a lot of good families in this town, a lot of good families. But, there's also a lot of very poor families that just don't care.***

*J:* ***And, a lot of families that don't care. I don't think poor and don't care should be put together.***

*D:* ***No. You're right.***

*Y:* ***They shouldn't go together.***

*D:* ***Poor families and families not even you're right. Poor doesn't even have anything to do with it. It's families that—***

*J:* ***Right. It's attitude.***

*D:* ***Right. It's the attitude and you were asking about college, some of the people, they treat the school more professionally than the parents that—I don't know, I shouldn't say that either I guess. It's just there's, this school is diverse.***

*J:* ***It's so diverse.***

*D:* ***Like a parent will come in to me and I could be in the middle of my class and they'll start yelling at their child in front of the class, whereas I don't think an educated parent***

*Y:* ***Really?***

*D:* ***would do that. I just really don't. I think that they would know better. And, that's happened a couple of times.***

*Y:* ***I've never had that experience.***

*D:* ***I have.***

Often, I was struck by the carefully chosen words that although were handled cautiously were nonetheless laden with assumptions and a desire to distinguish oneself from the "others" being described. In a focus group interview in March 1996, these Title I/reading specialist teachers all of whom identified themselves as outsiders to the community explained the parent situation at the school and why they couldn't ask the parents to collaborate with them in establishing literacy goals for their children.

*B:* ***And, although I don't mean to put them down in any way, they are not the kind of parents at least that we've ever found, maybe we're taking the wrong approach, that we've ever found are able to help us with goal setting as for as what they would like us to do with their children. I mean, number one, we have I would say we have, think of the classes you have, would you say a quarter of the children are Spanish, Latino background?***

*M:* *Really? But, you don't have bilingual programs.*

*B:* *We used to. We should. We don't have as many now that come and speak no English. We did at one point and that's why they had to have bilingual. But, we still have children who come from a home where Spanish is spoken at home and they come here and speak in English. And, the parents, you know are better at English now than they used to be but when you ask them to come into the school, all of those barriers go up. They feel uncomfortable, they feel uncomfortable with their language. They feel like not exactly sure whether they can trust us or not. I think they trust us as far as working with their students, but I don't know that they would feel comfortable discussing goals.*

*K:* *Discussing what maybe we should have.*

*M:* *Isn't that so interesting how cowed we are as parents that we, well, and myself included, that we turn our children over to schools absolutely trusting that they have your child's best interest at heart and that they know the best things for your children. And, yet there is also a mistrust that is exhibited in other ways.*

*B:* *And, then we have, I would say*

*K:* *I think we have a large Black middle class.*

*B:* *I was going to say, do you think we have a quarter Black?*

*K:* *A quarter Black, but mostly we have a more of a change, I think, as far as I think that the kids that are African-American are a little bit more like the "Ozzie and Harriet" generation of just—I see the Black kids being really more involved. I don't know if you see that. I see that, you know, those families are the ones that want to know what you're doing and how you're doing it and change. I mean do you see it or is it just me?*

*B:* *Well, I see them being middle class.*

*K:* *Mattie's mother, Mary's mother, you know they're the ones that are making noises.*

*B:* *But, they're not getting too involved. More involved than they used to I would say. I would say before they were pretty much in the same situation as the Latino population. Now, they've kind of moved up at least their socio-economic status, but I don't see them—some of them get involved—but for the most part, I don't see them getting involved.*

K: *For a lot of the parents that we have are also in the same mode that the kids are, they're illiterate. You know, they're not very literate. So, how could they tell? I mean if I were talking to a mechanic and asking him how to fix a car, I wouldn't know how to challenge him. So, they don't feel that since they're illiterate, how are they going to tell us about our reading program?*

P: *So, I think that what you're suggesting with what we just said, I don't think we gave much thought to it only because I really think that's something that would come maybe a year or two from now. I don't think they'd be ready to jump on the band wagon. I think if you were talking to the whole school and you asked the same kind of things to the parents of the whole school, you'd get answers.*

M: *You'd get some kind of consensus?*

P: *Yea, but I think if you threw those answers out right now to the parents of the children that we have, not all of them, but I would say the majority of them would be intimidated by that and would feel very uncomfortable. I don't think we're up to that point yet.*

While both caustic and sensitive, these comments are laced with an understanding of these educator's professionalism. As the school's reading specialists, these teachers are the literacy experts. Not only were they reluctant to invite parents into their space of academic authority, but also, they were quick to determine the usefulness of the contributions parents could make in their child's literacy learning. Clearly, these parents whose children were enrolled in the school's Title I program were being constructed and represented as "others" (Alcoff, 1991). Perhaps even more problematic is the way the teachers were choosing to speak *for* the parents with "discursive imperialism" (Alcoff, 1991, p. 17). This dangerous representation while being rationalized grew in consensus, became stronger, and existed temporally as truth.

Similarly, in a focus group interview occurring in March 1996, this pre-kindergarten teacher spoke of the disparity between teachers and parents' authority in taking responsibility for educating their children and more specifically fostering their literacy.

*And, you still have, I'd say a quarter of my class is the bad side, you know, where the parents—We collect snack money every month and I have one child whose paid four dollars at the beginning of the year. It's four fifty every month, so I mean I haven't gotten much from them and you know, I do send books home to be read and some of them I have a feeling just go home in the book bag and come right back the next day not ever coming out of the bag. So, I mean I've seen that. But, that's why I feel a little more positive this year than I have in a while just*

***because of the age I'm working with, but I'm sure if I was to go back, to the problems before then it would be the same thing over again with their experiences and stuff. I don't know. I don't know what happens from four year olds to first, second, third grade on up. Why the parents just kind of pull themselves away, but we really need to guide them more, be there more at that point because there's so much peer interaction where they're getting into patterns.***

From these statements, I began to question what the constructed, professional identity of these teachers was and how these identities hinged first on their relationship to the surrounding community as either outsiders or insiders. What was the public, discursive self of these teachers and what was the impact on the parents who were being so represented? Also, I began to wonder about the ways teachers' beliefs about "others" (parents, students, and community members) "illiteracy" are shaped by protocols, norms and acceptable frames for viewing their teaching and assessment of *children's* literacies.

It should also be noted that with the exception of one, all of the participants in this study were female. Although none of the participants overtly stated such, issues of identity and authority in the school setting could also have been marked by larger social struggles with inequity (Gore, 1993; Gore, 1992; Lewis, 1992). As Luke (1996) comments, even women in positions of authority rarely feel as though they have authority.

**Parents and Teachers: Unknotting the Paradox**

Noddings (1996) poses the questions: "Is community building desirable? Should we try to build communities in schools?" (p. 266). For the participants in my study, the answer to this question was rather paradoxical. In designing a series of professional development seminars based on implementing alternative, performance-based assessment, I was asked to include a segment (approximately four out of the twelve seminars) devoted to parental involvement by one of the Title I teachers. The participants began our discussions on parental and community involvement lamenting the lack of participation, support, and respect offered by their students' families. Yet, as we sorted through these issues and the participants discussed the design of their culminating final projects to invite family/community involvement, a contradiction arose as the projects were planned, articulated, and implemented. Initially, the participants were predisposed to negative, blaming assumptions about the families of the students they teach. Little by little, these stories of terrible experiences with parents manifested in limitations and boundaries for how much involvement was truly desired. For example, in an interview occurring in March 1996, the school's permanent substitute teacher stated about parents:

***No, these people are the antithesis of the type of parent you would want because they, they look for things. One of them said to me, I was just***

*letting the kids in, I was standing in the door early in the morning just waiting for them to get settled. She looks at me and says, "Well, what are you so happy about?" I wasn't doing anything, I was just standing there. I just looked at her and I said, I'm not unhappy. And, them two, those two just prowl around the halls, they drive all the regular teachers nuts. I mean, you get a couple parents do that to you, you become gun shy. Forget it. The door stays shut. I don't want any help. Well, and you can see how it could happen. Now, you know not every parent is going to be like that, but then again it always just seems like the ones that will help are the people that aren't real friendly. Like [S]. She's around all the time still and she, she's even said nasty things about D. to me. And, I'm thinking D. was an excellent teacher, what is this woman's problem? And, you will not get the support here. You won't. You learn that if it comes between you and them, they will win. So, I guess I would be very, very cautious about how much you let them in because sometimes I feel like they don't come in to help, they come in to spy. And, then they run and tell.*

This teacher's concern was about more than parental apathy; it was about outright antagonism between parents and teachers.

The following fifth grade reading support teacher's statement exemplifies the tension between wanting parents to be more involved in their child's education, but not too involved so as to overstep the teacher's besieged sense of authority.

*G:* *So, I just contacted parents. Just like that last year I will admit I really never ever called a parent or wrote a letter home t a parent because I just had the feeling that they were never going to do anything about it. And, I've called a few parents this year or wrote a letter home and I've seen some results. I've seen like changes in attitude of and I mean not that I'm dying to have them come into my room, they haven't come into my room, but open to invitations sometimes just to even discuss things. As a whole, it might not be the hugest success, but I think that one or two people, you know, it could possibly reach. All of these parents are sitting home doing nothing all day.*

*M:* *Oh, really?*

*G:* *A lot of them are. Yea. I mean they're out here at one o'clock waiting for their kid. I mean, they could be inside the school as long as we know, I don't think they feel welcomed.*

These comments struggle with the desire to have parents participating in the school curriculum, yet they are guarded and resistant to giving up too much academic autonomy to parents. Negotiating space in the classroom with parents clearly involved both personal and professional risk for these teachers.

Examples from Journal Writing:

Throughout the twelve seminars, the participants wrote a succession of nine journal entries. These journal entries were reflective commentaries on the class discussions, class readings, and practical applications being experimented with in the teachers' classrooms. Just prior to the time that the teachers were remarking in interviews on the deficits of their students' parents, they were also writing individually about the parents in their journals. While not exactly complimentary in their portrayal of parents, they took more responsibility on themselves for the break down in communication occurring between parents and teachers. For example, this reading support teacher who lived outside the community and described herself as socially distant from the surrounding community wrote in a journal entry in December, 1995:

> ***Few of the students have a collection of their own books at home. Even if they did have books at home, I am not sure that the parents would actively engage their children in reading activities. As Cynthia Unwin stated in her article, many parents simply do not know what to do to help develop their children's literacy.***
>
> ***This is the key point that all educators and policy-makers must remember. It's not that parents do not want to help in their child's literacy development but, they do not know the effective methods or have the necessary means. Our educational systems need to focus on developing and implementing interventional programs which teach parents how to work with their children and which supplies them with the necessary materials. Interventional programs which currently exist are effective: however, they do not reach all of the needy children and communities.***
>
> ***After I read the articles, I had to change my outlook towards parents. I have to honestly admit that I had a negative image of some of the parents of my students. I wonder how they could not prepare their children for school and for literacy development. I can not believe that parents sent their children to school without even teaching them the letters of the alphabet. I have often blamed this situation on the low socioeconomic status of the families. I just figured that this was how it was meant to be. My outlook has completely changed since I read the articles. I now realize that if we provide the families with effective intervention programs, we can improve literacy development.***
>
> ***Next week, we have parent conferences to discuss the First Marking Period Report Cards. When I meet with the parents of the reading support students, I plan to offer suggestions on how to work with their children at home. In the past, I was afraid that I might offend parents by offering suggestions. Now, I see that as a teacher it is my responsibility to extend my teaching to the home.***

Many important concepts are at work in this teacher's writing. First and foremost, is the realization of her responsibility in misunderstanding and mislabeling parents. Secondly, is her desire to balance instructing parents with intruding on parents' space of authority. In January 1996, this same reading support teacher continued to explore the tension between teachers' perceptions of their students' parents at this school. She wrote:

*One of the most significant changes in my teaching philosophy is the recognition of the necessary role of the parent and the community in literacy development. Unfortunately in this school district, the overwhelming attitude is parents versus teachers. Then, we all wonder why the quality of education in [this school] is decreasing.*

In her second to last journal entry from March 1996, this same teacher continued to problematize and question her relationship with her students' parents. She wrote:

*During the past three years that I have been a teacher in this district, I have done very little to involve parents in my reading curriculum. I never realized how important it was. In all of my classes at Penn State, they never once mentioned the importance of parental involvement or taught us how to involve them. Due to my ignorance, I never considered parental involvement a priority.*

*Furthermore, I honestly never imagined the parents of my students wanting to be involved with our curriculum. The link between parents and teachers in this district is very weak. When I try to involve parents, I almost feel as thought I am bothering them. Sometimes I get the feeling that they don't have time for their children. I'm not sure if this is a pessimistic or a realistic outlook.*

*Personally, I feel that many parents don't have strong parenting skills. They don't know how to help their children in their education. It seems like they don't even realize the value of education. When we talk about increasing parental involvement in [the] curriculum, we are talking about a much deeper issue. We're actually talking about changing a whole value system in this community. This does not happen overnight.*

*In the past few years, I have made some attempts to involve parents; however, not many have been very successful. Very few parents responded to my invitations. "some of the parents who did respond drove me out of my mind. The only reason they volunteered was to find something to complain about.*

*Although I haven't had many positive experiences with parental involvement, I plan to make more attempts. Through this class, I have begun to see the important role that parents can play in school. I need to make a bigger effort and to have a positive attitude. If I keep trying, I'm sure I will get through eventually.*

*I've thought of several ideas I can use to increase parent participation. Here are some examples:*

1. *Frequent telephone conferences*
2. *Monthly newsletter*
3. *Classroom helpers (parent volunteers)*
4. *Monthly curriculum meetings*
5. *Increased casual written communication through homework books and brief notes to and from parents*

Through each of these passages, we see this teacher working through her anxieties about involving parents in her curriculum and cautiously planning to take more risks.

Similarly, one of the Title I teachers who referred to herself as an "outsider" to the community used her journal writing as an opportunity to work through her fears about parental involvement in the school and brainstorm some new ideas to foster home-school connections for the Title I children. In a journal entry written in November 1995, she wrote:

> ***Parental involvement used to be such a scary word. I suppose that is because that in the ivory tower of pedagogy parents were amateurs who were better off left at home.***

In December, 1995, this same Title I teacher wrote:

> ***One idea we are using now that I feel can be extended involves an after school reading club. M. [another Title I teacher] has done an excellent job in bringing literacy activities to a group of gifted students. The Title I staff has aided her in this endeavor along with parents and older students. The club is so valuable and so much fun that one has to wonder 'Why just for the gifted students?'***
>
> ***If Title I students were also involved, parents would become more involved with literacy too. Parent involvement would be required for at least one of the sessions. Since the program is after school, many parents would have to pick their children up. That in itself would mean interaction between teacher and parent.***

What is significant in these passages is the shift from a passive description of parental involvement to an active re-imagining of parental involvement.

In November 1995, this third grade teacher wrote negatively about her experiences with parents' abilities to contribute to their child's literacy learning. She wrote:

> ***The extent to which the benefits of 'positive' family literacy became quite apparent was during the years I taught the K-4 program in our school district. It is an early intervention program designed to meet the needs of 'at-risk' children. The children are tested and qualify for the program according to the 'neediest.' During my years of working with these children it never ceased to amaze me that many children had never heard the classic fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and were not allowed to use crayons or play dough at home. Furthermore, those same children had every Nintendo game available. These were also the same children that had poor comprehension skills and very short attention spans during story time. I have often thought how sad it was that these children at such a young age had not developed a joy for literature. I***

*then made a conscientious goal to introduce them to literature and centered activities around various themes.*

*In addition to the lack of literacy exposure by some parents, it was also obvious that some parents were themselves limited in their literacy exposure. Last year I had an experience dealing with an illiteracy [sic] parent. The parent had difficulty identifying basic shapes during a parent conference when shown their child's report card. It was then that I was truly aware of the diversity among the literacy of families within the community.*

*If children are limited to the literacy environment of their family alone, especially if the families literacy is lacking, then we as teachers must expose those children and the families.*

A month later, this same third grade teacher responded more proactively about the literacy situation of children and families in the community. In response to Come and Frederick's (1995) article, she wrote:

*The article describes a realistic approach which promotes a family literacy program designed to meet the needs of at-risk youngsters. The program 'provides special help in language and literacy development while increasing parental awareness of the importance of their children's education through reading books.' Throughout the program, parents were involved in the planning, thus making them more apt to become involved and supportive.*

*The program is one which I feel could be put into place in our school district. The five workshops could be set up in our elementary school with topics similar to those described in the article. I also believe that the key elements to success is advertising through churches, grocery stores and to provide a free book for the initial incentive.*

Not all of the participants made the leap from philosophical reflection to a plan for action. For some, just including personal reflection was a step. For instance, in December, 1996, this first grade teacher summing up the experiences of her students noted in a journal:

*Upon reflecting on my students; family literacy I realized how diverse their experiences are in terms of literacy and literacy models in the home. Some of my students are read to on a regular basis, have an incredible speaking and writing vocabulary and themselves are good literacy models. Other students, however, are rarely, if ever read to and ask to borrow books to read because there aren't any books at home. At the beginning of the school year our community library sponsors a program called Jump Start. The program is designed to encourage children who don't have a library card to help them register for a card. It is now December and only half of my twenty-six first graders have registered for or already had a library card. It saddens me to think that*



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> ***my two year old daughter has had more literacy experiences and library excursions than these children may have in a lifetime.***

Similarly, this sixth grade teacher becoming more reflective of her practice responded in her journal (December, 1996):

> ***As I read through the articles on parental involvement, I heard some of my, unfortunate, views towards parents. Jenkins suggests in Come and Frederick's article, that the distancing of poor families from the doors of the school is frequently perceived by educators to be a lack of parental interest. My thoughts exactly!! In Cairney and Munsie's article, "Parent Participation in Literacy Learning," they suggest that the reason for some failures of programs to get parents involved is because some teachers have negative attitudes about parents and parent participation, sometimes claiming that parents are apathetic and come to school only to criticize. This is also a feeling I too have experienced, having had an awful time with one parent my first year teaching. The sight of her still makes me shudder, seven years later!!***

The common thread running through all of these entries is one of working through misconceptions and teacher-imposed limitations. In differing degrees, all of the teachers were confronting the paradox at work between their interpretation of their professional experiences and the critical values being advocated in the course readings. In their journals, the teachers were responding to texts that critically problematized assumptions about their students' home literacies. As McLaren (1989) notes, one of the most visible tenets of enacting critical literacy comes about in the texts being read in class. In our seminars, the course readings acted as a mediating force between parents and teachers. Thus, the readings became a possible voice for parents and created a space within which to discuss, reflect, and revise previously held assumptions.

Final Projects

Perhaps an even more pronounced paradox arose in the final projects the teachers planned for the course. In the majority of the projects, the professional ethos presented in the papers denoted a strong commitment to bringing students, families, and educators together to forge a sense of community. Even so, this desire for a school learning community was being defined on the terms of the teachers. In most instances, the teachers not only controlled the invitation, but also the terms of the invitation.

As the culminating final project for the seminar, my participants put together year-long activities and goals for encouraging parental involvement in their curriculum to be implemented during the next school year. There were four group projects and two individual projects. The methods involved in the projects ranged from conducting workshops with parents (and sometimes families—students and siblings—as well) after regular school hours, inviting parents to participate in activities in their child's class during regular school hours, and sending activities home with the children for their parents to do with them.

The following excerpt from a statement of purpose in a parental project to be implemented during the next school year speaks to some of the concerns of critical literacy yet it also raises questions about the extent to which these goals were successfully applied.

> ***Our project is designed with the purpose of facilitating a stronger link between home, school, and community.***
>
> ***We will endeavor to engage our student's parents in the classroom and in their own homes in regards to developing their child's emergent literacy.***
>
> ***Our program will anticipate an increase in parent confidence in assisting their children in and out of the classroom.***
>
> ***We will have continual correspondence and communication throughout the year in terms of suggestions, newsletters and techniques parents can use with their children. We will strive to reach parents for involvement in their own 'comfort zone.' We want our parents and our students to be successful.***
>
> ***As a diverse community, our program will endeavor to communicate the relationships between language and culture and to appreciate cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom.***
>
> ***Our students will also learn to collaborate with others.***

Ironically, this group of four young teachers (a fourth grade teacher, a permanent substitute, a fifth grade reading support teacher, and a pre-kindergarten teacher) chose to implement their project only with the pre-kindergarten teacher because children (and parents) are more "hopeful" at this age. In an interview in March 1996, the pre-kindergarten teacher stated the following rationale for doing such:

> *M:* ***Ok. So, you're just going to be doing it with T.'s class? You're not going to do—***
>
> *T:* ***That age just to start. And, then I think if we get a good response from the community, then if it sparks interest then maybe they'll approach us and say, you know, I really enjoy working with this age lever, but what about the older kids kind of thing. That would be also a sign of success if you're hearing a response from the community itself. Because if you're not hearing anything, then obviously there's no, it's a one-sided thing.***

Assessing this project would largely come about through brief surveys given to the volunteers, parents, and the teacher. Students would be given an opportunity to evaluate the activities with volunteers collectively and orally with the teacher. The following questions were planned for the volunteer evaluation:

**Over, how would you assess the activity?**
**How did the activity effect student learning?**
**How easy or difficult was it for you to manage the students?**
**How would you improve the activity?**

With the exception of the last question, these questions were to be answered not with a written response, but a corresponding check next to the answer that best demonstrated the feelings of the volunteer. The questionnaires for parents and teachers were almost identical in both content and format.

In another group project, three teachers—one first grade teacher, one third grade teacher, and one fifth grade teacher—set out a plan to offer five evening workshops for parents. The workshops were designed to provide informative, hands-on literacy activities that the parents could do at home with their children. In their mission statement, these teachers wrote:

> **In conclusion, each of the five workshops will consist of hands on activities as well as demonstrations and time for questions and answers. Parents will be encouraged to actively participate in certain parts of each workshop. Incentives for joining us will also be provided. Door prizes such as books and school supplies will be given out. Refreshments will also be served and baby-sitting services will be available. Each workshop will be advertised throughout town and we will enlist the help of the Latino Leadership Alliance and the Family Center to "get the word out." At the conclusion of each workshop we will thank the parents who attended and encourage feedback. Parents will be told to contact us should any questions or concerns arise. Ultimately, the goal of our program is to welcome parents into the school, to alleviate some of the fears and misconceptions parents may have and to provide parents with activities or ideas that they can use at home. By building relationships with our students' parents and helping them to develop more positive parenting practices, we are ultimately forging a partnership that will create better literacy and learning experiences for our students.**

This project was inspired by an article we read in our seminar entitled, "Family Literacy in Urban Schools: Meeting the Needs of At-Risk Children" (Come & Fredericks, 1995). In the article, the authors describe a framework for effectively including parents in an inner-city school's literacy program and overcoming years of "benign neglect" experienced by families of low socio-economic status (p. 566). Come and Fredericks (1995) suggest five critical criteria that must be in place to form successful alliances between parents and schools:

> **(a) the establishment of a program built upon the expressed needs and wishes of parents,**
> **(b) a willingness of both parents and teachers to promote a spirit of shared responsibility,**
> **(c) parents' active involvement in making decisions,**
> **(d) establishment and maintenance of open lines of communication throughout the school year, and**
> **(e) a long-term commitment to continuous and sustained involvement. (p. 567)**

The reoccurring theme in Come and Frederick's work is one of equanimity in responsibility and participation between parents and teachers. Somewhat ironically, the project these participants created allowed very little space for parents to offer their ideas and input into their child's literacy learning. In an effort to assess the project, parents would be asked to fill out reaction/evaluation questionnaires on the evening's work, but they were not being asked to co-construct the events of the evening.

The two participants who worked individually on a final project for the seminar both elected to focus on their classroom curriculum. F., the school art teacher, designed an elaborate kit for children to take home to work on with their parents. The kit included a stuffed bear, a series of activities, several books about bears, a camera to take a picture of the bear with the child, and a journal to write in about the bear's (and child's) exploits. The instructions for the kit were explained in a letter to parents.

> **Dear Parents,**
> **Tonight is your child's turn to have our class bear "Kato" spend the night at your home. Your child may dress Kato or add to his special trunk. Also, included is a camera to take a special picture (only one please) of Kato's special adventure with your child. Please take a little time to help prepare his or her journal entry. The picture will be developed at a later date and placed on their journal page.**

As part of his project, this participant wrote in his statement of purpose that this project would enable students "to use life skills along with academic learning."

The other participant who worked individually on her final project simply devised a program where retired community members would be invited into her second grade classroom to read with the students. She was the only participant in my seminar who taught at a different school from where the seminars were taking place. This second grade teacher taught at a neighboring private school. Consequently, she did not have the same investment in the school politics and community and often deferred opinions in class on such topics. Of all the participants in the seminar, her project was the least developed in terms of length and a plan for implementation. It read more like a journal entry than a formal, culminating final project.

The two most transcendent final projects on parental/community involvement came about from a group of three Title I teachers and a group of three sixth grade teachers. These projects distinguished themselves by attending to deeper issues

confronting the sense of community between the school's curriculum and the students' parents as well as they proposed more in-depth parental and student evaluation of their programs. Perhaps the similarity in grade level and goals of their work enabled these two groups of teachers to work together in a more critically meaningful manner.

The three Title I teachers worked on a final project together that centered around three workshops for parents. These teachers explained in their overview,

> **This project is a collaboration of [this] Title I Language Arts Staff. The goals of Title I have been modified to include more parental involvement.**
>
> **The requirements of this course will foster better school-community relations. It is our goal to facilitate three parent involvement workshops during the 1996-1997 school year.**
>
> **These workshops will be followed by the Title I Program's first attempt at a Parent-Teacher-Student (triangulated) conference.**

As part of this project, during the first workshop the Title I teachers planned to explain to parents the new (1994) parental involvement law for Title I. The Title I Parental Policy states:

- **The LEA, after consultation with and review by parents, shall develop written policies to ensure that parents are involved in the planning, design and implementation of the program.**
- **The LEA must make policies available to parents of participating children, provide reasonable support for parent involvement activities as parents may request, and provide for timely response to those recommendations made by parents.**
- **The LEA shall conduct, with the involvement of the parents, an annual evaluation of the content and effectiveness of the parental involvement policy.**
- **The Lea will build the schools' parents' capacity for strong parental involvement and eliminate all barriers to participation by parents that are disabled, have limited English proficiency, have limited literacy or are part of a racial or ethnic minority.**

Because these teachers were required to involve parents in the decision-making process of their program, they made an attempt to do so. As evidenced from earlier excerpts taken from a focus group interview in March, these Title I teachers were guarded in their desire to involve parents in meaningful ways. Yet, by May when they completed their project for the seminar, they were writing about the role of parents in a more inclusive manner. Specifically, in the plan for the three workshops, the Title I teachers stated that they wanted to include parents in brainstorming global goals for their children's literacy learning and that they wanted parents to be a part of the selection/reflection process of their child's portfolio. They wanted parents not only to select a sample from their child's



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work to be included in the portfolio, but also to reflect on the portfolio themselves in an evaluative manner.

The rest of the workshop time would be devoted to modeling different assessment approaches (i.e., portfolios, running records/miscue analysis, and the Botel Retellings) in the first workshop, and in the second workshop modeling techniques for encouraging reading at home (i.e., sending home books, demonstrating reading strategies, and emphasizing the importance of reading aloud to children). In the final workshop scheduled to occur at the end of the school year before summer vacation, the Title I teachers planned to have parents write and construct a book together with their child. About this final workshop, these teachers wrote:

> **Having students and their parents make books together helps with several things. First, it creates a feeling of excitement and satisfaction about writing stories. Second, it develops skills in writing stories patterned after books they have already read. Third, it allows an opportunity to practice writing skills. Knowing that stories can be read over and over again and even shared with others encourages using complete sentences, interesting words and ideas, correct punctuation and spelling, and sticking to a main theme. This project should actively involve parent and child in this learning experience.**

To assess the "success" of each workshop, the Title I teachers planned to have parents fill out an evaluation form. Additionally, the teachers themselves would also fill out similar evaluation forms and use the information from both sources to determine changes in their program.

The remaining group of three sixth grade teachers also focused on a series of parent workshops for their project. Instead of regulating parental involvement, this team sought to invite parents to be a part of structuring their child's curriculum. To this end, they planned to create a "coordinating team" of parents and school personnel that would work together to plan and implement new programs and activities for sixth grade students. In their introduction, these three teachers wrote:

> **Perhaps the best way to create the team would be by issuing an open invitation to parents, teachers, administrators and other school staff interested in participating in the Coordinating Team. An ideal group would be an equal number of teachers and parents, and the diversity of ethnic, racial, and social groups that comprise the school community.**
>
> **It would be ideal to enlist a parent to act as part-time coordinator for the team. Someone who gets things started, locates resources, and makes sure that everyone is informed about upcoming activities. Another option, is to have a**

**teacher, "released" with coverage, to serve this function for a few hours each week.**

**The team itself will need to be given the time to communicate with each other, stay focused, reflect and plan the team's activities.**

One of the most exceptional qualities of this final project was the amount of interactive, reflective assessment built into the work o the teachers, students, parents, and other members involved in the "coordinating team." Part of the design of the program was to have teachers, students, and parents fill out a general "needs assessment" survey up front about the school that would assist in refocusing the curriculum to be more inclusive of their students' families. As with the other projects, the primary goal with this project was to encourage parental involvement in the school. To bring this result about, the teachers planned the following measures:

a. **send home a variety of announcements, letters, and reminders.**
b. **translate invitations if necessary**
c. **remind students to bring their families to the events**
d. **make personal invitations for students and parents.**
e. **have parents call each other**
f. **encourage parents to contribute their time, skills, and knowledge to the activities**

Additionally, these teachers drafted the following letter to be sent home to parents to initiate their program at the beginning of the year.

**Dear Family Members,**

**This year at [this] school we are making a special effort to have our school be a place where children feel comfortable, cared for, and included. We would like children's family members to feel especially welcome here, too. We are calling our effort the S.T. & P. Together Program, and the idea is to refocus our existing activities, and creating new ones, so that all of us feel that we are part of a caring school community.**

**There will be many opportunities to participate in activities with your children, and be involved at school. You will receive information throughout the year, but you can also help us now by joining a Coordinating Team of parents and school staff, which will create and organize the activities.**

**We would like to invite you to an open meeting to learn more about the S.T.& P. Program, add your ideas, and consider how you might participate. If you are interested in**

**being on the Coordinating Team, or simply just helping out, please join us!**

**Sincerely,**
**The Sixth Grade Team**

The following questions were proposed to be used in reflection and evaluation of the "Coordinating Team."

**Recruiting Parents: How do we balance involvement in the team? How do we reach out to involve under-represented groups of parents? How do we coordinate parent volunteers?**
**Team Building: How do we build openness and trust in order to work effectively as a group? How do we make decisions as a team?**
**Goal Alignment: How do we keep the group focused on the overall goal of building a more caring school community?**
**Communication: How do we keep each other informed? How do we gather the input of other member of the school community? How do we publicize activities?**
**Reflection: How do we reflect on, and evaluate the effectiveness of individual activities? How do we reflect on and evaluate our own effectiveness as a team?**

The underlying tone of these questions is extremely democratic. The desire to share power and responsibility is clear. Additionally, this team proposed a general activity assessment that demonstrated a similar ethos of equanimity.

Through the course, whether in journals, interviews, or the final project, all of the participants worked through misconceptions and fears about having their professional authority shredded by criticism or undermined through absenteeism. Collaborations between teachers and parents often occurred around problems with students or complaints against teachers. Trust was balanced by a tenuous thread. Additionally, all of the teachers who recounted bitter intrusions by parents stated the greatest trauma occurred when the administration refused to support the teacher. The prevalence of these stories of professional undermining made the teachers' attempts at egalitarian community-building all the more remarkable. The most critical part of our work together became simply the time allowed teachers to work through their fears, concerns and ideas collectively. This time to articulate through different mediums and in the presence of different audiences permitted the teacher to work through the paradox of the desire and resistance of wanting parents to be more involved in their curriculum. The perceived audience for journal writing, focus group interviews, and the most public sphere of the final project also contributed to the ways meaning was being constructed/negotiated and may explain further the contradictions occurring in each.

## Concluding

The question lingers of how and by whom community, parental involvement, and indeed literacy is to be defined. However, a greater question of addressing needs becomes salient. Specifically, how could the teachers speak for their needs while addressing the needs of the children with the children's families especially at times when the needs of the teachers appeared to be at odds with those of their students' families?

Noddings (1996) answers her earlier question on the desirability of community building with a tentative yes.

> We should try to establish some of the desirable features associated with community: a sense of belonging, of collective concern for each individual, of individual responsibility for the collective good, and of appreciation for the rituals and celebrations of the group. But here we have to remember that there are usually subgroups in our schools that come from larger communities of memory. (p. 267)

What do teachers do with the "subgroups" Noddings refers to in their schools? What happens when a teacher views herself as a member of conflicting "subgroups?" What is negotiated between the self audience and the community audience? What are the ways teachers find themselves isolated within their professional communities? All of these questions speak to the tension inherent in constructing a sense of community. "Education for community life requires both self-knowledge and collective-knowledge" (Noddings, 1996, p. 267). This dialogue between self and collective knowledge Noddings refers to is the trajectory towards critical literacy, how we begin to see "others" as connected to us.

The point at which this professional development program was shaped by a critical stance towards literacy occurred through the teachers' reflection. Whether in individual journal entries or collective discussions, the tenor of critical reflection most profoundly impacted the teachers' learning and ideological movement toward change. The key of critical literacy in this setting occurred through permitting the teachers to bring "background" tensions to the "foreground." In this particular instance, the "background" consisted of issues of authority and identity as they were being forged by the teachers' experiences with and perceptions of their students' parents and the school community. Thus, critical literacy first became an imagined conversation between teachers, students, parents and myself as the facilitator before new commitments, new risks, new curricula could be designed.

## What's Left Out: Exploring the Embeddedness of "Othering"

> Social, political and educational discourses construct teaching as a representational practice; that is, as a language-based practice of describing our representing things in the world in ways that strive to be truthful and accurate. But, confidence in language's ability to deliver truth and accuracy has been shaken to its foundations by the current critiques and crises of representation circulating within and across many academic and social discourses and practices. (Orner, Miller & Ellsworth, 1996, p. 87)

As I have reconstructed this data for analytical purposes, I have been uncomfortable about the complicated process of telling the story of ethical transformation. There is so much more that I want to reveal about my simultaneous inspiration and disappointment in working with these teachers, the times when I judged them much the same way they judged their students' families. The question confronting me is actually one of how to represent this knotted paradox of learning and they ways that I am speaking for others in this research.

Speaking for others has been criticized as converging with "othering" (Alcoff, 1991; Rose, 1989; Orner, Miller & Ellsworth, 1996). Alcoff (1991) asks, "is it ever valid to speak for others who are unlike me or who are less privileged than me?" (p. 7). This question not only applies to the teachers in my study, but to me as well. With the vantage of being a researcher, am I sot speak to the needs of the teachers or the needs of the students when these needs appear to be in conflict with one another?

Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth (19916) pose the question, "How might I represent the other without making her story my own or my story hers?" (p.89). To these questions, I must add how is it that I am connected and disconnected to the participants in my study? At what points do I criticize them? At what points do I empathize with them/identify with them? Where am I in this process? What are my subjectivities? Where is my allegiance? The question is not one of whether to intervene in the teachers' rather veiled prejudicial statements and constructions of parents as "others." The question is *how* to effectively intervene through the means of professional development particularly when my desire as the facilitator was to create a shared space for learning. Is critical literacy in conflict with a participatory sharing of epistemological authority in professional development? Does critical literacy in this context equate merely to my ideology?

To some extent, I have constructed these teachers as other to my ideology while researching the ways teachers create others of colleagues, parents, and students.

TABLE D:
The Embeddedness of "Othering"

Teachers and Other Teachers

Teachers and (Other) Students

Teachers and (Other) Parents

Myself as Teacher and Other Teachers

These contradictions and conflicts in the constructions of identity effected each level of interaction between the participants and myself. I felt conflicted between my identity as a teacher and my identity as a researcher. The researcher sought understanding and elicited conversation while the teacher sought ideological transformation. Even through I was the facilitator, a teacher among teachers, I was still an outsider. I was university

affiliated. I would never be able to share an emic perspective (Harris, 1990) in this research. Without a wholly emic perspective, can I ethically speak for any of the "others" mentioned above? And, so I struggled with when to listen and when to speak.

If agency resides in the negotiated linkings between self and other, then we must strive to take the "otherness" out of others. In the case of my representing this work, I hope simply that I have reconstructed the living energy of speech and thought enough so as to demonstrate the complexity of this work that extends far beyond the pages it is written on.

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